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## The 'Sandalistas'

# ... or is it an invasion of Sandinista sympathizers?

By Georgie Anne Geyer

Every Thursday morning at 7 a.m., from 30 to 50 "concerned" Americans living in Managua, Nicaragua, picket the American Embassy. Before the oppressive heat of the day sets in, they march in a circle in front of the main gate, passionately protesting American policy here.

Ed Griffin Nolan of Witnesses for Peace — one of the groups in this Committee of U.S. Citizens Living in Nicaragua — explains to me the intent of the groups and individuals. "We're basically involved here in speaking to the conscience of the U.S.," he was saying. "We try not to get involved in the internal Nicaraguan issues."

Inside the American Embassy later that day, an embassy officer cracks, "There would be no economy here at all without the American journalists and the Witnesses for Peace."

Sandinista Nicaragua is filled with American "visitors" these days. They are sponsored by their churches, or their visits are paid for by the U.S. government. They are earnest and solemn, and they are suspicious of everyone who does not feel exactly as they do.

The *Internacionalistas* — the international brigade-types from all over the world who jam the Intercontinental Hotel — barely speak to one another or to anyone else. These *Sandalistas*, as they are sometimes jocularly called because of their sandals and long stringy hair, are filled with distrust of anything American.

The Nicaraguan government says that 50,000 Americans alone have come through in the last year. The American Embassy places the number at lower levels, although it admits it does not and cannot really know. The one thing certain is that American protesters are fervently opposed to every bit of American policy against the Marxist Sandinistas.

When you really study the visits of the Americans here, you find some curious things. The liberal members of the U.S. Congress (maybe up to 60 in all) who have come down meet privately with Sandinista leaders, such as President Daniel Ortega, and will not allow embassy officers to sit in on the meetings.

Many of them give direct and pointed "advice" to the Sandinistas, advice on how to defeat or wait out President Reagan's policies. (One more curiosity here is that Cuban President Fidel Castro consistently has been advising the Sandinistas not to confront the United States whereas American congressmen often advise them to do the opposite.)

The American church people, many of them extremely well-meaning but embarrassed by, and thus controlled by, past American invasions of Nicaragua, pay little attention to the policies of the churches inside Nicaragua or to their suffering under the Sandinistas.

House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill is a case in point: He admits that he gets his information on Nicaragua from the Maryknoll order, an order that has swung to the far left, while the entire Catholic hierarchy inside Nicaragua and elsewhere in Central America puts up an impassioned and difficult fight against the Marxist groups.

Father Roberto Amilcar Torruella, director of communications for the archbishopric of El Salvador, told me: "Until the visit this winter of Catholic leaders from Washington, the North American church had not made any direct contacts with us, hierarchy to hierarchy. . . . They had the wrong ideas about us. They saw guerrillas as Robin Hoods and angels. Now, the panorama is changing. But these were errors that caused us a great deal of damage."

There is evidence that when the Roman Catholic high-level group that went to Central America this winter finally makes its report, it will come out with a much more critical view of the Sandinistas, even going so far as to call them increas-

ingly "totalitarian."

At the struggling independent newspaper, *La Prensa*, every day — while combatting censorship and every kind of oppression — the staff has to set aside a couple of hours to deal with the intense visiting "gringos."

"Every day Intourism (the government tourist agency) calls," Horacio Ruiz, a top journalist at the paper, told me. "They will say, 'There is a group of American tourists. Can you receive them?' Sometimes we see the same persons five times. Of the groups of 20, two or three will be aggressive. They will say: 'Is it true you are with the CIA? Why don't you condemn the Reagan policy? Why are you a counterrevolutionary?' The rest are disoriented. They want to know. They try to come and understand the country. But they didn't dream beforehand of some of the things that I say."

Do the Americans in general serve

the purpose of the Sandinistas against their own government? Are they a real power in the propaganda struggle that constitutes a crucial part of the policy battle between Managua and Washington?

These Americans certainly have every right to be there. But one has to say honestly that they are often used. For instance, at *La Prensa*, most of the groups tape the editors' and reporters' remarks. One day, editor Jaime Chamorro openly remarked that the paper had received \$6,000 from the American Democracy Foundation.

This innocent admission of a perfectly appropriate gift was then translated by the Sandinista Press Association to read that *La Prensa* had received the money from the CIA, an accusation that could, of course, close the paper down.

There is little question that the visits have an effect on American policy. It was the visits of many of

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the members of Congress here that led to the turndown of the *contra* aid package. One has to wonder whether — had they learned anything on the trip about the regime at all — they would then have been so surprised when Ortega immediately went to Moscow.

Perhaps the key to the problem lies in the fact that even the church people, with the best of intentions focus only on the American conscience. They do not seem to care what happens to the Nicaraguan people or whether the regime is oppressive, or whether it is a strategic threat to anyone. They are focused only on themselves.

That seems to me to be rather too easy a way out for anyone, but particularly for Christians.

*(Georgie Anne Geyer became a foreign correspondent for the Chicago Daily News in 1964 and has been a syndicated columnist since 1975.)*